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NEW SPECIES OF THE MONTH: THE VU QUANG DISCOVERIES

Earlier issues of this newsletter have described the Vu Quang ox (*Pseudoryx nghentinhensis*), a strange hoofed animal found in 1992 in a remote region of Vietnam along the Laotian border. Since that find, evidence of **no less than three more sizable new mammals** has been collected in the same general area. Nothing like this gold rush of zoological discoveries has occurred in this century.

Dr. John MacKinnon, of the World Wide Fund for Nature (known in the U.S. as the World Wildlife Fund) was nearing the end of a return expedition to the area in March of this year when local inhabitants showed him and researcher Shanthini Dawson some skulls from another animal they hunted. MacKinnon recognized the skulls belonged to a muntjac, a type of small Asian deer, but the species was a new one. The structure of the horns was different, and the skull was much larger than that of any known muntjac. MacKinnon estimated the new "giant muntjac" weighed 50 kilograms, making it twice the size of the common muntjac.

Despite their vegetarian diet, **muntjacs have large canine teeth**, and the teeth on these skulls appeared even more prominent than normal. This feature is very prominent in the reconstruction some readers may have seen in *TIME* magazine (June 20, 1994, p.52), which shows the teeth projecting very noticeably from each side of the mouth. Alan Rabinowitz of the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York reports that this is in error: the teeth are not nearly so predominant in the living animal, and are not even visible when the mouth is closed.

Researchers working for the WCS became the **first Westerners to actually see the giant muntjac.** They found a specimen in Laos, in a private menagerie maintained by a local military commander, and were allowed to take a blood sample. Dr. MacKinnon believes the giant muntjac deserves its own genus, and he named it *Megamuntiacus vuquangensis*. (This would be the fifth new genus of large mammal described this century, *Pseudoryx* being the fourth.)

VU QUANG (CONT.):

Rabinowitz, in a recent telephone interview, added that DNA analysis done so far indicates the new species is close enough to other muntjacs to belong with them in the genus *Muntiacus*, so this point is not yet settled to everyone's satisfaction. Also reported from the private Laotian zoo was a **hybrid of the giant** and a more common species of muntjac, which would support the same-genus line of reasoning.

That wasn't the end of the surprises from southeast Asia. From a mountainous area north of Vu Quang, called Pu Mat, have come skulls of **an animal with short, sharp antlers**. This is known locally as the "slow-running deer" or "slow-moving deer." **Another set of antlers** collected by MacKinnon apparently belongs to an animal known as the *mangden*, or "black deer."

Finally, we continue to **learn more about the Vu Quang ox** itself. In 1994, a Vietnamese hunter caught the first live specimen to be reported to authorities. It was a female calf, perhaps four or five months old, standing 61 cm high at the shoulder and weighing 18 kg. It had yet to develop the twisting horns that give the animal one of its local names, *sao la* ("weaving spindle.") The specimen was found in the Khe Tre forest, just outside the boundaries of the Vu Quang Nature Reserve. (**Late note**: a second ox, a male, has just been caught.)

An article in a British newspaper, *The Independent on Sunday*, quoted MacKinnon as saying the discoveries are evidence that similarly unexplored regions around the world could yield still more large animals. Let's hope so.

SOURCES: Connor, Steve. 1994. "Lost worlds rich in unique wildlife," *The Independent on Sunday*, July 3, pp. 12-13 // Linden, Eugene. 1994. "Ancient Creatures in a Lost World," *TIME*, June 20, pp. 52-4 // Rabinowitz, Alan. 1994. Telephone interview, August 31 // Scott, Kate. 1994. "Vietnam Explosion," *BBC Wildlife*, June // World Wide Fund for Nature. 1994. "Vu Quang Ox Found - Live!" Press release, June 24.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO... THE BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

An apparent success story from the conservation front concerns one of North America's most elusive and, undoubtedly, cutest mammals, the black-footed ferret. Declared extinct at least twice, *Mustela nigripes* has stubbornly resurfaced and may be on its way to regaining its rightful place in the ecosystems of the West.

The ferret is a small nocturnal predator, a weasel relative about eighteen inches long. It's mostly brown, with round ears and a black mask around its eyes.

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET (CONT:)

The **ferret ran into trouble** when humans began eradicating the "nuisance" prairie dog, the ferret's main prey animal. Those efforts led to the ferret's presumed extinction by the 1950s. **In 1964 came the first "resurrection,"** when a ferret was spotted in Mellette County, Wyoming. Researchers counted 21 of the animals. Ten years later, however, the ferret had vanished again, apparently for good.

In 1981, the ferret appeared in Wyoming once more, rediscovered by a mixed-breed dog named Shep. Shep, not being interested in live specimens, killed his discovery, but investigators found that Shep's dinner was not the only ferret left.

This second rediscovery set off a sort of scientific carnival, as federal, state, and private researchers swarmed into the area. Every ferret in sight was trapped, radio-collared, studied, and ear-tagged, sometimes until their ears became tattered.

The ferrets were decimated a few years later by distemper. Biologists captured all the remaining animals they could find, a total of 18, for a **captive breeding program.** As always, this last-chance approach proved controversial. Some conservationists see an animal's removal from the wild as a tragically necessary step, while others denounce it as a kind of sacrilege.

Right or wrong, the program has saved the ferret. Today there are more than 300 captive animals. In 1990, the first carefully monitored release into the wild took place when 49 ferrets were turned loose in Wyoming. Six ferret youngsters were spotted in 1992. Another captive colony lives in Colorado Springs' Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, which sent six more specimens to Wyoming in September 1994. Mortality among the released ferrets is high, totaling perhaps 85% of the 180 released to date, but the little prairie-dweller is finally back were it belongs.

SOURCES: Anonymous. 1993. "Reintroduced ferrets breeding," *Oryx*, January // Anonymous. 1991. "Black-footed Ferrets: a Risky Return to the Wild," *National Geographic*, September // Bergman, Charles. 1990. *Wild Echoes*. New York: McGraw-Hill // Noreen, Patty. 1994. "Ferrets don't leave home without a fuss," *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, September 16, p.B1.

UNCLASSIFIED: THE MYSTERY WHALES

The last whale scientifically described was the Peruvian beaked whale (*Mesoplodon peruvians*) in 1991. Are there other cruising the deep? According to observers, there may well be.

MYSTERY WHALES (CONT.):

Naturalist Robert Sibbald, for example, once spotted what looked like a 60-foot **sperm whale with a high dorsal fin.** (You may recall that Sibbald was the first great authority on whales, and the blue whale is still called Sibbald's rorqual.) The known sperm whale has no true dorsal fin, just a sort of ridge. Sibbald formally described this whale in 1692 as a new species, *Physeter tursio.* Other seventeenth-century mariners also reported the animal, mainly off the Shetland Islands.

Speaking of dorsal fins, no known cetacean has more than one. In September 1867, however, Italian naturalist Enrico Giglioli reported watching a large **baleen whale with two dorsal fins** off the coast of Chile. He observed it well enough to write down a detailed description and propose a scientific name, *Amphiptera pacifica.* Giglioli's whale was about sixty feet long and "gray greenish" with a greyish white underside. The dorsal fins were triangular and over six feet apart. Sightings of what may be other specimens of this whale were reported by fishermen off Scotland in 1898 and in the Mediterranean in 1983.

Philip Gosse, a prominent naturalist and nature writer of the nineteenth century, once watched a school of what he described as **30-foot beaked whales** in the North Atlantic for twelve hours. These whales, black on top and white below, with all-white pectoral fins, have never been identified. It should be noted that traveling in a school or pod and remaining in an observer's sight for a long period represent very unusual behavior for any type of beaked whale.

Another strange beaked whale, a denizen of the eastern Pacific, has been spotted several times and was recently photographed off the coast of Mexico. About sixteen feet long, the animal is distinguished by a somewhat flattened head and a low, wide-based dorsal fin. The larger whales, presumably males, are black with light-colored "racing stripes" down their sides, while smaller ones are uniformly bronze or grayish-brown. This cetacean may represent the Indopacific beaked whale (*Indopacetus pacificus*), previously known only from skulls, or it may be something entirely new.

Several **Antarctic explorers**, including the famous Sir James Ross, have described a mystery whale about the size of a large orca, or killer whale, but with a strikingly tall, slender dorsal fin. This animal was sketched in 1902 by explorer Edward A. Wilson, who reported observing a group of four such whales. The observers did not believe they were seeing orcas, whose striking color pattern makes them instantly identifiable and whose dorsal fins, while prominent, did not match the fins of these whales. This species was seen again in 1911, and an unidentified whale that might be the same type was photographed by cetologists off Chile in 1964.

MYSTERY WHALES (CONT.):

In 1981 and 1983, Russian mammologists described **two new species of orcas** from the Antarctic. These "new" whales, *Orcinus nanus* and *Orcinus glacialis*, may represent separate reports about the same animals, which show yellowish rather than white undersides and are reportedly smaller than the standard *Orcinus orca*. Some experts attribute this color variation to a film of tiny creatures called diatoms rather than to the whales themselves, but there's so much we don't know about orcas that the subject remains open for discussion.

Sea captain and naturalist Willem F. J. Morzer Bruyuns has a lifelong fascination with whales. He has not only studied them, but, as an active ship's master, has observed and painted most of the known species from life in his forty years of travel around the world. In his 1971 book, the *Field Guide of Whales and Dolphins*, he reports observing what looked like a **solid brown orca** speckled with star-shaped white scars. All known orcas, excepting the occasional albino, sport the same distinctive black-and-white color pattern. Bruyuns' twenty-foot "Alula whale" also presented a less streamlined appearance than a normal orca, with a higher, more rounded forehead. As many as four of these whales at a time passed Bruyuns' ship north of the village of Alula in Africa's Gulf of Aden.

This was not the only problematical report from this observer. For instance, the striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) of the Atlantic and Mediterranean is named for black stripes that form a pattern like the bridle of a horse. Morzer Bruyuns encountered what looked like a shorter, stouter version of this animal, with no trace of the definitive black markings. Off Senegal, the captain saw large numbers of a brown and white dolphin about six feet long. To him it resembled the known bridled dolphin or Atlantic spotted dolphin (Morzer Bruyuns apparently considers these to be the same species, *Stenella frontalis*: other authorities use the names for two similar but separate species, *S. frontalis* and *S. plagiodon*. It should be noted here that many dolphin species appear highly variable and that dolphin taxonomy in general is an absolute mess.) Again, however, a characteristic marking, in this case a pattern of light spots, was absent. The white underside was also more distinct. Do these observations represent new races or subspecies of known dolphins, or something even more interesting?

Still more puzzling is what Morzer Bruyuns calls the "Illigan dolphin." This is a strikingly colored dolphin, brown with a pink underside and yellow flanks, seen off the Philippines in schools of up to 30 animals. In size and shape it resembled the solid black dolphin known as the melon-headed whale (*Peponocephala electra*), but the color difference is so stark that Bruyuns doubted it was merely a variation of that species.

MYSTERY WHALES (CONT:)

Finally, Morzer Bruyuns in 1960 encountered a lone seven-foot dolphin that made no sense to him, although he later theorized it might be a hybrid. It looked like the Indian Ocean version of the bottlenosed dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), but with a longer, thinner snout. The basic silver-gray color was broken by dark patches in front of the dorsal fin and lighter gray skin aft of it.

Researchers surveying marine mammals off Chile in 1964 reported another puzzle: **schools of "small, stout porpoises"** about four feet long, brown on top and white beneath. Cetologist Richard Ellis notes that this sounds like the well-known harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), but that species is thought to exist only in the North Atlantic, so a new type may be involved.

Certainly, not all of these reports represent new species. Just as certainly, some of them do. Which ones? Only time will tell.

SOURCES: Bright, Michael. 1989. *There are Giants in the Sea.* London: Robson Books // Bruyuns, W. F. J. Morzer. 1971. *Field Guide of Whales and Dolphins.* Amsterdam: C.A. Mees // Ellis, Richard. 1982. *Dolphins and Porpoises.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf // Heuvelmans, Bernard. 1986. "Annotated Checklist of Apparently Unknown Animals With Which Cryptozoology is Concerned," *Cryptozoology,* Vol. 5 // Heyning, John E., and Marilyn E. Dahlheim. 1988. "Orcinus Orca," *Mammalian Species,* # 304, American Society of Mammologists, January 15 // Nowack, Ronald M. 1991. *Walker's Mammals of the World.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press // Raynal, Michel. 1993. Personal communication, February 5 // Raynal, Michel, and Jean-Pierre Sylvestre. 1991. "Cetaceans with two dorsal fins," *Aquatic Mammals,* Vol. 17.1.

NEWS AND COMMENT

A reptile presumed extinct for 40 years and recently rediscovered is taking steps toward long-term survival. The Jamaican iguana (*Cyclura collei*), the island's largest indigenous land animal, resurfaced four years ago, and a handful have now been sent to two U.S. zoos to increase the population through captive breeding. As with the black-footed ferret (above), the rediscovery was credited to a dog. In this case, a pig hunter's canine retrieved a live specimen in a forested area known as the Hellshire Hills in 1990. The total population is estimated at under a hundred individuals, with the chief threat being posed by introduced predators. Comment: This editor was fortunate enough to see the newly-arrived breeding group of "extinct" lizards at

the Indianapolis Zoo, where another rare specimen, a Cuban ground iguana (*Cyclura nubila*), was drafted for a photograph for an upcoming book. The lizard, evidently unimpressed, decided to terminate the photo shoot by giving the editor a good bite on the chin. Both editor and reptile are doing fine.
Sources: Alberts, Allison. 1993. "The Most Endangered Lizard in the World: the Jamaican Iguana, *Cyclura collei*," *The Vivarium*, July/August, p.12 // Cerio, Gregory. 1994. "Carribean Lizard Love Nests," *Newsweek*, August 1, p.8 // Gibson, Richard C. 1993. "A Short Study of Captive Jamaican Iguanas *Cyclura collei* at Hope Zoo, Jamaica," *The Dodo*, Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, 29:156-167.

A new tree kangaroo has been confirmed from New Guinea. Tim Flannery, who discovered Scott's tree kangaroo on the same island, reports that the newest find "is very primitive in its body plan and behavior." His point is that the animal is not particularly specialized for tree life. It does, in fact, spend most of its time on the ground. It is not a small animal, ranging up to 1.3 meters long with the tail and weighing 20 kilograms when fully grown. The kangaroo is black with a white chest and other white markings. It shows no fear of people, emits a whistling call, and is altogether adorable by human standards. It lives in mountain forests in the Indonesian half of the island. A formal description and scientific name are pending. (The mystery surrounding this animal, which was photographed but not collected in 1992, was mentioned in Vol. 1, Issue #2.)
Sources: Champkin, Julian. 1994. "Out of the trees, the kangaroo family's new branch," *Daily Mail*, July 21, p.19.

The Fish and Wildlife Department of the state of Vermont has confirmed a **sighting of three cougars.** The cats have not been caught, and their origin is unknown. The Eastern cougar was supposedly exterminated by the middle of this century, and it's been over a hundred years since a wild cougar was killed in Vermont. Source: *USA Today*, 1994. September 16, p.10A.

RESOURCES:

BOOKS.

Katona, Steven K., *et al.* 1993. **A Field Guide to Whales, Porpoises, and Seals from Cape Cod to Newfoundland.** Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute. A very detailed guide to all species of marine mammals in the area described by the title. This book offers no cryptozoological material *per se*, but it does have over 200 photographs and drawings of cetaceans and pinnipeds, alive and stranded, from all angles. Accordingly, it's a most valuable resource for those studying sea-creature sightings. Comparing descriptions to these views will weed out many errors.

BOOKS (Cont.)

Another good source of sea creature photos for such comparisons is Leatherwood, Stephen, *et al.*, 1976. NOAA Technical Report NMFS CIRC-396, Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises of the Western North Atlantic.

PERIODICALS.

Gain, Bruce. 1994. "**You Really Call This Living?**," *OMNI*, September, p.81.
More on the newfound inhabitants of a Romanian cave, which developed their own chemical-based ecosystem during millions of years of isolation from the surface.

George, Carol Ann. 1994. "**Featured Feline: Iriomote Cat**," *Cat Tales*, April, p.5. Latest on the status of this critically endangered feline (*Felis iriomotensis*), described only in 1967. Gives a population estimate of 50-100 animals and describes what is now known of the cat's behavior.

Gramza, Joyce. 1994. "Mystery Mammals," *Popular Science*, October, p. 26. Brief roundup on the Vu Quang ox and its still-mysterious fellow mammals.

Jackson, Peter. 1993. "**Status of the Tigers of the World**," *CBSG News* (Captive Breeding Specialist Group, World Conservation Union), December. Updates on all eight subspecies, living and presumed extinct. Lists the Caspian and Bali tigers as extinct and the Javan as "Extinct? 1980s."

Thanks as usual to Dr. Karl Shuker for the British publications quoted in this newsletter.

IN CLOSING:

All serious researchers who are not already members should join the International Society of Cryptozoology, which serves as a clearinghouse for information and labors to make searching for unknown or presumed-extinct animals a respectable scientific specialty. Contact J. Richard Greenwell, Secretary, ISC, P.O. Box 43070, Tucson, AZ 85733. While this editor is a member of the ISC, *Cryptozoology Newsletter* is not an official ISC publication.

I welcome comments, corrections, or clippings. Responses to the editor may be directed to 802 Williamsburg Dr., Kokomo, IN 46902, USA. (This address is changing: watch for another new one in the next issue. To those who have written to the editor and are awaiting a response, I apologize and promise to respond as soon as I've relocated.)
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